SITUATED LEARNING AND BIBLICAL JAZZ:
Biblical Studies, Democratic Transformation,
and the High School Religion Classroom

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Abstract
In this paper, I use learning theory to extend Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s critique of the teaching theories that dominate Biblical studies. With the inner city Catholic high school classroom as a practical touchstone, I trace the “banking” model of education across the educational lifecycle, through secular and religious iterations. Using learning theory, I analyze kyriarchal and emancipatory methods, drawing links between the Biblical studies classroom and the different communities to which academics and graduate students are accountable. By illuminating the power of learning-setting structures, legitimate peripheral participation, and transparent process within the “community of practice,” I argue that situated learning theory helps educational reformers strategize for democratic change. I propose “Biblical jazz” as a provocative trope to guide such educational reform. I submit that claiming a paradigm, sorting out interpretive strategies, and engaging in real processes of production, are three situated practices that can make the Biblical studies classroom more emancipatory.
Introduction

Approaching Biblical Studies from the perspective of “situated learning” means focusing on the situations where those who study the Bible actually work and live. In this paper, I continue the discussion on pedagogy and didactics that Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has begun in *Democratizing Biblical Studies*.¹ To deepen the perspective, I pursue a binocular approach. I relate the preparation of professionals in the graduate Biblical Studies classroom to the practice of Bible educators² in an inner city Catholic high school – a role I held for many years. I suggest that we can learn much by reflecting on the impact that our academic educational models have on Bible education “on the ground.” I do not claim that high school Bible teachers are exemplary of all Biblical professionals; instead I understand that knowledge begins with the particular instance. I also believe that what Bonnie Miller-McLemore has said about studying religious practice in general, also applies to Biblical Studies: the point where “where human suffering evokes or calls for a religious

² The names we give to things are freighted with power. For consistency, I use these key terms as follows:
- teacher, educational leader, educator, or professor - the person in a learning environment who holds institutional power (the power to arrange curriculum, assign grades, etc.);
- student - the person in a learning environment who is the institutional object of the teacher’s power; and
- learner - all persons in the learning environment, whether “teacher” or “student,” since all are learning something from their engagement with each other.

I also distinguish Biblical Studies from Bible education where Biblical Studies is the set of disciplines that study the Bible within higher education and academic circles, and Bible education is that which takes place in primary, secondary, congregational and lay educational settings where the Bible is studied.
response,” the point where Biblical scholarship meets the learner’s *sitz im leben*, is precisely the point where studying the Bible can become most illuminating and transformative. This is a sentiment firmly in line with Schüssler Fiorenza’s emerging “fourth paradigm” of Biblical Studies.

Thus, I begin by describing the concrete situation of inner city youth – a web of schooling and struggle where many Biblical Studies alumni will pursue their profession. I then take up the critique that Schüssler Fiorenza levels against the dominant pedagogy and didactics in Biblical Studies today. I argue that this “banking” family of graduate school approaches are akin to the approaches that dominate inner city high school education; and that both fail to meet the real needs of students. I then expand upon her proposal for a new classroom practice (her feminist adaptation of Theme Centered Interaction) by explicating its grounding in social learning theory. I argue that academics and grassroots educators alike are in desperate need of a theory of *learning* to complement their overworked (and often under-analyzed) theories of *teaching*. I show how a “situated learning model” can illumine the practices within Biblical Studies and Bible education. I suggest how this model can help academics and high school teachers foster agency; how it can teach them to move gracefully out of the way so that democratic learning can transpire. After briefly sketching what socially situated, emancipatory Bible education could actually look like in practice, I draw out three important implications for structuring the graduate Biblical Studies

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4 Such a theory of learning would complement the four “theoretical practices” of epistemology, pedagogy, didactics and communications which Schüssler Fiorenza analyzes and explicates. See especially Schüssler Fiorenza, *Democratizing*, 128.
If this paper is successful, it will spur practitioners to “democratize Biblical Studies” by pursuing concrete changes in the vision, content and structure of graduate Biblical education.

I. Communities under Fire

Religion teachers within inner city Catholic high schools serve communities under fire. They educate poor and working class children, many not Catholic or even Christian, in the urban communities where they live. These are the sites of deindustrialization and capital flight, of underemployment and of minimal government and corporate investment in culture, education and health. These are also the sites of persistent conflicts for cultural survival, where public schooling and corporations have – for more than a century – struggled to assimilate non-Anglo populations to the American economy and its dominant way of life.\(^5\)

The mechanisms for assimilating students are sometimes violent, but more commonly depend on hegemony: “a type of leadership through culture in which one class dominates another by controlling ideology.”\(^6\)

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so on. Schüssler Fiorenza aptly names this system of structural hierarchical oppressions, and insidious hegemonic dynamics, “kyriarchy.”

In order to survive and to thrive in such kyriarchal settings, young people need a number of behavioral tools. Among these are the skills to succeed professionally, to resist culturally, and to unmask hegemony. Parents send their children to school, in part, to master life and employment skills. Reading, writing, and numeracy, showing up on time and speaking the dominant dialect of White American English, make the difference between poverty and material survival in the United States. Parents also hope to share with their children the stories and symbols of their native cultures. These ties to family, history and community values help students to survive in the face of hegemonic violence. Finally, parents hope that their children’s lives will be, in some measure, better and freer than the ones they have led. Here the school is a resource for insightful practice, a training ground for critical reflection and analysis. It helps students to penetrate the disguises of hegemony, to emancipate our common ways of life.

Kyriarchy is derived from the Greek kyrios which means “lord, master” and archein which means “to rule.” Schüssler Fiorenza, Democratizing, 11.

Cf. Schüssler Fiorenza, 12-3: “Biblical interpretation, I propose here, is best conceptualized as an integral part of emancipatory struggles for survival, justice, and well-being” (my emphasis). Implicit in the skills of “succeeding professionally, resisting culturally, and unmasking hegemony” is another important capacity: that of boundary crossing or “code switching.” Originally a term for communication in more than one language, code switching can be extended to encompass the challenging skill of moving from home culture to dominant culture with self-consciousness and integrity. I will touch upon this capacity at the end of this essay, where I discuss the work of negotiating the commitments and practices of overlapping community membership. Because of its critical importance as a material and spiritual survival skill, it deserves sustained attention. See the two articles by Suzanne Damarin, “Schooling and Situated Learning: Travel or Tourism?” 77-88 and “The Emancipatory Potential of Situated Learning,” 189-200, in Situated Learning Perspectives, ed. Hillary McLellan (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Educational Technology Publications: 1998). Cf. Frank Jablonka, “Communicative Social Styles and Code Switching in Rai: Transcultural Passages,” Zeitschrift Fur Literaturwissenschaft Und Linguistik 37(148), Dec 2007: 158-82.
II. Models of Education: From Banking to Social Learning

Every good educator knows that formal teaching encompasses at least three dimensions: the “explicit” curriculum of readings and assignments, the “implicit” curriculum of methods and styles, and “null” curriculum of omissions and silences. Teaching Bible for survival, resistance and critique, and doing it well, means aligning these three curricula so that they are not working at cross purposes in any one lesson or plan. It also requires aligning curricula across generations, because teachers often teach as they were taught. It is manifestly counterproductive, for example, to “teach” critical Biblical interpretation in a dogmatic way that brooks no critique. It is also counterproductive to educate future teachers in a way that cuts against the values of survival, resistance and critique – if those are the values that their future curricula must support.

I do not imply that graduate Biblical educators should design their classes for the (important) work of teacher training: that task belongs to the fields of religious education or curriculum and instruction. Nor do I suggest that Biblical Studies be tailored to the needs of confessional private schools. Instead, I contend that academics should be reflective about the orientation of their curricula – implicit, explicit and null. Accountable intellectual inquiry should be “compatib[le] with participation in communities of practice outside [the] school.”

Practitioners of Biblical Studies are, in fact, accountable to many overlapping constituencies. These include: the academy in general; the field of Biblical Studies itself,

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9 Schüssler Fiorenza echoes this sentiment on 152: “a radical democratic model of education seeks to foster a style of Biblical learning/teaching that does not undermine democratic thinking.”
and one’s chosen paradigm of interpretation; one’s actual graduate institution; the
denominations, individuals, and organs of civil society that look to academics for expertise;
the seminaries and universities, congregations and denominations, schools and service
institutions where graduates will find their jobs; and the religious traditions and identity
constituencies to which many practitioners feel called or bound. Is my Biblical Studies
curriculum internally coherent – explicitly, implicitly, and in terms of topics covered? To
which situations outside academia is it well-aligned? Which sets of values does it work
against? To be reflective professionals and professionals-in-training, the practitioners of
Biblical Studies should be able to answer these questions; to function within Schüssler
Fiorenza’s fourth paradigm, they must.

**Hegemonic Methods and the Banking Model**

The three pedagogical methods which, according to Schüssler Fiorenza, currently
dominate Biblical Studies, deeply inform Bible education as well. These three methods –
“banking,” “consumer” and “master-disciple” – all rely upon a *banking model*. The “deposit”
may be the theological doctrine that a particular Bible verse embodies, the historical-critical

11 Schüssler Fiorenza lists four constituencies of accountability: the academy, religious
communities, individual spiritual seekers, and the democratic societies that constitute our
world. If the goal is “transforming graduate education in the interest of grassroots
movements and struggles for justice,” she inquires, “[h]ow do currently existing educational
practices teach (or fail to teach) Biblical scholars [the] critical self-reflexively and
constructive accountability” that are essential to achieving that end? (19).

12 This is a pervasive theme for Schüssler Fiorenza. “Conscientization” is one way she
frames the practice of generating critical social consciousness among professional and
grassroots Biblical interpreters (15-29, 82, 120-1, 125, and 128). See also Joan Wink’s
discussion of conscientization as a process of reflection upon one’s professional
educational practice: “Conscientization,” in *Critical Pedagogy: Notes from the Real World*

13 See Schüssler Fiorenza, 130-9 for a more thorough analysis of these three didactic
models.
“truth” that a positivist exegete has “discovered,” or the ludic or political hermeneutic technique that a forward-thinking scholar has developed. But, the dynamic is always the same. The teacher is active, teaching, depositing, while the student is passive, consuming, being formed. This banking model militates against survival, resistance and critique because it teaches interpreters to read the Bible in uncritical, hegemonic ways.

The roots of the banking model lie deep in the educational infrastructure, and are solidly tangled with those of contemporary philosophy, psychology, and political theory. Richard Rorty’s 1999 essay, “Education as Socialization and as Individuation,” exemplifies the difficulties that this widely accepted model can produce for emancipatory cultural work. For Rorty, “education is not a continuous process from age five to age 22,” but represents, instead, “two entirely distinct, and equally necessary processes – socialization and individuation.” Socialization is about forming humans into the reigning image of functional adulthood, and individuation is about “inciting doubt,” “stimulating imagination,” and “challenging the prevailing consensus.” Wisely (to his mind), liberal democracies have assigned K-12 schooling for socialization, and non-vocational higher education for individuation. If primary and high schools transmit a vision of democratic citizenship, filling it out with life skills and historical/cultural data, colleges and universities can awaken the

14 The Irish Benedictine Mark Patrick Hederman has written eloquently about the effect of such methods upon the creative and dynamizing force of the imagination: “The truth is that every one of us who has suffered through so-called ‘free’ education in Western Europe during the twentieth century is Harry Potter. Imagination was given no birthday party and had its tiny little room under the stairs.” Mark Patrick Hederman, Symbolism: The Glory of Escutcheoned Doors (Dublin: Veritas Publications, 2007), 41. The same can be said of any student’s sense of freedom, agency and voice, when subjected to this kind of banking “education.”
16 Ibid., 117.
17 Ibid., 118.
power to critique that vision (as well as preparing students for advanced professional work).

This K-12/college dichotomy reflects a transition between concrete (grade school) and formal (post-adolescent) stages of mental operation – a dichotomy that is central to developmental and cognitive psychology.\(^{18}\) It is also integral to the models of faith development that currently dominate professional religious education.\(^{19}\)

At stake in these “transitions” between primary, secondary and higher education is our approach to human learning and to emancipatory pedagogy. Are those who have not learned deconstruction and college-level social analysis best described as “pre-”critical; and if so, does that mean they are simply empty vessels waiting to be filled? Does the human drive to reflect upon and consciously appropriate experience lie latent until it springs forth, fully formed, at the moment of our acceptance into university? How far “down” the age scale does the capacity for emancipatory Biblical interpretation really “reach”? To mature adults? To college students? To teenagers who have mastered algebraic notation and abstract thinking? These questions may sound a bit odd because they rest upon the false

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\(^{18}\) Academics take note: though the developmentalist perspective is widely discredited in postmodern humanities circles, it is alive and well on the “Student Services/Student Life” side of campus, where many undergraduates and graduate students live, work, and participate in deeply formative learning activities and programs.

dichotomies endemic to developmentalist thought. Whatever the validity of stage theories, the problem with developmentalist thinking is its inevitable tendency to seek out discontinuities in cognition and behavior, rather than addressing the perduring dynamics that drive all human learning and growth.

A model of learning as the continual process of reflection upon experience is much truer to life. Such a model understands learning as a form of agency that grows and changes as it encounters each new facet of life. It can encourage educators to align their curricula for agency and reflection. It can guide Biblical work across generations, from graduate coursework to sermon writing to summer Bible camp. Such a model recognizes the actual diversity in every learning setting; it acknowledges the different roles and competencies represented by each teacher and student. But it is less likely to raise false dichotomies between adults and youth, between passivity and mastery, between “experts” and “lay persons.”


Schüssler Fiorenza’s feminist adaptation of “Theme Centered Interaction” (TCI) marks an important shift from a pedagogy of banking to one of continuous reflection upon experience. TCI addresses the subject matter, form and context of a learning experience. It sees group dynamics as central, and treats disturbances and passionate commitments as clues about areas of important content to be explored. Using TCI, Schüssler Fiorenza recasts the “banking triangle” of “Teacher (filling) Student (with) Content” as a self-conscious circle of reflection. Here democratic understandings of power and alternating leadership can authorize active, self-aware inquiry by all. She further situates this “I-We-It circle” within a “Global” feminist analytic, bringing the ubiquitous influence of kyriarchy into clearer view.

The fundamental feature of TCI that helps it to overcome the pitfalls of banking is its radically social understanding of the learning dynamic, which Schüssler Fiorenza augments through her feminist critical lens. Inherent in the basic “axioms” and “postulates” of TCI is the vision that human autonomy exists in relation to a network of relationships, a network that sustains our identity. In such a view, learning is more “a social [and] collective, rather

23 Ibid., 213-5.
24 The axioms are (1) “The human person’s autonomy and relational character are dialectically connected;” (2) the basic “Option for Life” (e.g., “Respect is due to all living things and their growth”); and (3) the call “to act responsibly within a conditional freedom.” The postulates are “be your own chairperson” (agency) and “disturbance and passionate involvements take precedence” (embodied social relations). Each of these recognizes that individual existence and freedom is constituted by the interpersonal, social and material
than an individual, psychological phenomenon." Learning is a practice, created and
recreated in a negotiated social space. Thus, while banking rests on an individual theory of
teaching (deposit → student), TCI arises from a social theory of learning.

Identifying the social learning roots of TCI can bring a nuanced analysis to bear on
both Biblical Studies and Bible education. In the spirit of (sociologist) Pierre Bourdieu and
(social theorist) Michel Foucault, social learning theory yokes human learning with “the
production and reproduction of the social order;” it highlights tacit knowledge, material
culture, and the practices of everyday learning and life. To be clear, social learning theory

networks that define the (real) parameters of our (genuine) freedom. Scharer and Hilberath,
The Practice of Communicative Theology, 118-23.

25 Jean Lave, “Teaching, as Learning, in Practice,” Mind, Culture and Activity 3(3), 1996:
149.
26 Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation
27 Over the past two decades, social theories of learning have contributed to pedagogy and
didactics in a wide range of settings including K-12 and university classrooms, teacher and
professorial professional development, academic writing across the curriculum, workplace
training and quality improvement, and more. The following give a sense of the breadth and
depth of the discussion. Hillary McLellan, ed., Situated Learning Perspectives (Englewood
Cliffs, NJ: Educational Technology Publications, 1996); Chris Kimble, Paul Hildreth and
Isabelle Bourdon, ed., Communities of Practice: Creating Learning Environments for
Educators, vols. I and II (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2008); Jason Hughes,
Nick Jewson and Lorna Unwin, ed., Communities of Practice: Critical Perspectives (New
York: Routledge, 2007). Some specific studies include Anne Ellen Geller et al., The
Everyday Writing Center: A Community of Practice (Logan, Utah: Utah State University
Press, 2007), which deals with writing across the university curriculum; and Russell P.
Warhurst, “‘We Really Felt Part of Something:’ Participatory Learning among Peers within a
University Teaching-Development Community of Practice,” International Journal for
Academic Development 11(2), Nov 2006: 111-22, a study that deals with cross-
departmental praxis groups for newly qualified university professors.
28 Lave and Wenger, Situated Learning, 47, 55.
29 On the roots of social theories, of which social learning theory is a branch, see Andreas
tocnode?id=g9781405124331_chunk_g978140512433122_ss1-133.
as such does not purport to be a program for emancipatory education; its power lies in the ability to describe the numerous and subtle ways in which learning takes place.

The Social Characteristics of Situated Learning

The “situated learning” model pioneered by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger in the 1990s introduced social learning theory to a number of professional fields. Their model emphasizes structure over instruction by framing learning as the process of “legitimate peripheral participation” within a “community of practice.” It stresses transparent activity, real processes of production, and other previously under-theorized factors in the learning setting. While all learning is “situated” somehow/somewhere, only certain types of learning are consciously structured for emancipation. In their original monograph, Lave and Wenger move easily between “learning” as a ubiquitous human activity, and “learning” as an empowering form of adaptation to the world. However, attending closely to the dynamics of hegemony requires distinguishing description from prescription. Thus I will discuss how (1) structure, (2) communities of practice, and (3) “peripheral participation” describe ubiquitous dimensions of human learning. By distinction, I will discuss (4)

30 See Etienne Wenger, Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 85. Lave’s oeuvre is firmly rooted in an academic tradition that pursues emancipatory education; Wenger’s work bridges the worlds of academic research and humanistic workplace reform. However, the uses to which their work has been put (like corporate “knowledge management”) sometimes cut against their original humanizing impetus. See the introductions to volumes I and II of Kimble, Hildreth and Bourdon, Communities of Practice: Creating Learning Environments for Educators, and the differing politics of the essays those volumes contain.

31 The seminal texts in this discourse are Wenger, Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity, and Lave and Wenger, Situated Learning.

32 See Lave and Wenger, Situated Learning, 89-118.

33 Ibid., 33-4.

34 See Jason Hughes, Nick Jewson and Lorna Unwin, “Introduction,” in Communities of Practice: Critical Perspectives, 6.
“legitimate peripheral participation,” (5) transparent activities, and (6) real processes of production as learning structures designed to foster agency, survival and democratic critique.\(^{35}\)

(1) **Structure.** From a social learning perspective, the primary role of the teacher or educational leader is to structure the learning environment. “In”-structing the students though lecture, assigned reading, or carefully prescribed procedure, is a derivative task. Biblical Studies practitioners work with numerous different “materials:” texts, both ancient and modern; insights from lectures, ethnographies and personal reflection; and procedures such as research skills and exegetical techniques. While these are the raw materials and tools from which intellectual products can be assembled, learning itself transpires in and through the structured practice of production.\(^{36}\) A Biblical Studies classroom is organized to produce tangible outputs (like papers, grades and course evaluations) and capable practitioners (like ministers, teachers, academics and well-rounded citizens). “Which capacities?” is the key question. For some, it is the capacity to “reproduce the data I received" or to “perform the exegetical procedures I was taught.” This is the reason for the peculiar type of “schizophrenia”\(^{37}\) that many students experience within Biblical Studies: the capacities they develop in the classroom are unrelated to the ministerial or educational work they must one day perform. Others develop the capacity to produce new scholarly data and

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\(^{35}\) Lave and Wenger speak only of “legitimate peripheral participation;” they do not consider the possibility that “legitimacy” may be a distinguishing feature of *emancipatory* learning settings alone.


\(^{37}\) Schüssler Fiorenza, *Democratizing*, 29.
hermeneutical procedures – which may (or may not) be accountable to realities outside the academic guild.

Teaching for agency and democratic transformation means structuring the learning environment so that the raw materials within it can be used to “reflect” upon experience.\(^\text{38}\) Not merely in the form of introspective reflections and personal journals (though these can hardly hurt), but as rigorous academic products. Reflecting on experience in order to democratize future action (democratic praxis, in short) produces capacities that are at once textured and transferable, particular and flexible.\(^\text{39}\) In Biblical Studies and Bible education, it produces the skill of deploying the Bible wisely and deftly in one’s changing “situation.”

(2) Communities of Practice. I would argue that there is always a structure to our groupings. It may be explicit or emergent; it may arise by conscious intent or by default to the (hegemonic) standard. From a situated learning perspective, a structured setting that works toward some sort of common product or set of goals is best characterized as a community of practice. The most obvious communities of practice are localized and concrete (a classroom or workshop, a family, a synagogue or school). However, the concept can be extended to more diffuse groups, including religious denominations, academic disciplines, and Biblical paradigms.\(^\text{40}\) In these communities, the rhetorical ethos can be

\(^\text{38}\) Here I echo a theme that runs throughout Schüsslher Fiorenza’s work. She laments, for example, the fact that many evangelical students in Biblical studies “are not encouraged in a critical learning process to critically articulate their own faith based questions, religious experiences and fundamental convictions. They therefore do not have the opportunity to work through them critically in dialogue with each other and with the major discourses of the field.” Democratizing, 29-30.

\(^\text{39}\) For a brief overview of “praxis” as a theme in education, see Groome, Christian Religious Education, Ch. 8, “Some Philosophical Roots for a Praxis Way of Knowing.”

\(^\text{40}\) Here I use the term “community of practice” in a broader way than it is found in much of Wenger, and (even more so) in Lave and Wenger. I seek to underline the ethos and practices that every grouping generates, whether consciously or not.
kyriarchal, or it can be democratic.\textsuperscript{41} A democratic community defines engagement with new or critical perspectives as integral to its “regime of competence.” In this way “marginalities” can turn into “peripheral wisdom;” new ideas can arise and move to the heart of the praxis.\textsuperscript{42} Thus, multiple identities and overlapping accountabilities become resources within a democratic learning structure. Learning to negotiate overlapping communities of practice with self-consciousness and integrity is essential to studying the Bible at both the graduate and grassroots levels.\textsuperscript{43}

(3) \textit{Peripheral Participation}. Learning takes place through a process of peripheral participation or centripetal entry into a community of practice.\textsuperscript{44} Learners enter the community unfamiliar with materials and vocabulary, tools and procedures, social standards and aesthetic or methodological norms. “Peripheral participation” suggests that students struggle to identify the explicit and implicit “curricula” in any setting, and to respond to them in strategic ways.\textsuperscript{45} Some communities structure peripheral participation in ways that frustrate agency or that discourage centripetal entry. Engaging in “unrelated,” “irrelevant,” or

\textsuperscript{41} Schüssler Fiorenza, \textit{Democratizing}. She notes that every ethos and community discourse is “rhetorical” in that it has a purpose: to persuade, to (re)construct a world and a set of preferred possibilities.

\textsuperscript{42} Wenger, \textit{Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity}, 117-8. This perspective is shared, or course, by adherents of the “fourth paradigm” in Biblical studies.

\textsuperscript{43} For a similar analysis of overlapping identities from the perspective of kyriarchal structures and “subject location,” see Schüssler Fiorenza, \textit{Democratizing}, 212-3. For an astute account of university/academic politics as the intersection of multiple communities of practice, see Nalita James, “The Learning Trajectories of ‘Old-timers’: Academic Identities and Communities of Practice in Higher Education,” in \textit{Communities of Practice: Critical Perspectives}, 133-9. Negotiating overlapping communities of practice requires the skill of “crossing boundaries” with integrity; see n. 8 above.

\textsuperscript{44} Cf. Warhurst, “We Really Felt Part of Something,” 116. Of course, in some settings, students are barred from learning altogether, because of cultural or economic hurdles, or even through outright bigotry; this prevents any kind of participation at all.

\textsuperscript{45} As Wenger points out, “Disagreement, challenges and competition can all be forms of participation. As a form of participation, rebellion often reveals a greater commitment than does passive conformity.” \textit{Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity}, 77.
“sequestered” work keeps newcomers on the periphery. In this case, students learn that the material they are studying is not true to life; they learn to pass tests and jump through necessary hoops.\textsuperscript{46} Conversely, propulsion into full and immediate participation can teach students that only the strong survive; in this case, students learn to “watch out for number one” (or to quit before they are fired).\textsuperscript{47}

\textit{(4) Legitimate peripheral participation}. While peripheral participation is a part of any learning structure, “legitimate peripheral participation” suggests a community that consciously fosters greater agency, and that generously opens its defining practices to student engagement. TCI, for example, facilitates legitimate peripheral participation by structuring graduated practices of self-consciousness and competence into the group experience. TCI groups use the “interrelation of process, structure and … trust”\textsuperscript{48} to support and drive the challenging work of constructing a more democratic practice. Structure shapes and supports process; process builds trust; trust validates the safety of the environment and enables participants to push even further. The TCI group leaders carefully calibrate the developing “It” (theme) in order to foster legitimate peripheral participation:

The design of a theme [plays an important] part [in] keeping dynamic balance [within the group]. Formulating themes is a major (and difficult) task for TCI practitioners, as the theme should connect to experience and interests of participants, open up space for discussion and exploration, provide focus [and]…be adjusted in language and demands to participants[,] and so on.\textsuperscript{49}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{46} Lave and Wenger, \textit{Situated Learning}, 37, 104-5.
  \item \textsuperscript{47} \textit{Cf.} Warhurst, “We Really Felt Part of Something,” 114-21, \textit{passim}.
  \item \textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 2.
\end{itemize}
As the group pursues and refines its thinking about the theme, members learn to deepen trust, to take charge of reflection and to practice democratic agency, until “experienced groups” can organize their own structures and define their own themes with skill.\textsuperscript{50}

Educators can similarly structure their environments to foster engagement with Biblical themes in a way that is self-reflective, critically graduated and increasingly self-directed.

(5 & 6) \textit{Transparent Activities and Real Processes}. Every community of practice includes peer-to-peer sharing and informal observation; it may also include direct instruction and sharing of codified norms. To capitalize on all these learning modalities, and to help align the explicit and implicit curricula, it is important to craft processes and tools that are “transparent.” Opaque activities mystify the norms and procedures of a practice; transparent ones work equally well for production, interaction, and apprehension. This means arranging opportunities to create meaningful products in ways that demonstrate the logic of the tasks and the whole. It is the opposite of classes that dwell upon preparatory “exercises,” floating theory and disarticulated skills. “Creating meaningful products,” in turn, means participating in the real process of production. As Lave and Wenger have noted, for all its oppressive potential, apprenticeship has the virtue of generating useful and concrete contributions to the production process – real products that impact the community of practice, or the world, in tangible ways.\textsuperscript{51}

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 3.

\textsuperscript{51} Schüssler Fiorenza analyzes the oppressive dynamics of apprenticeship in academia and Biblical studies at length. Lave and Wenger, \textit{Situated Learning}, allude to the use of apprenticeship as an exploitative labor practice, 29-30. They go on to study five different “apprenticeship” settings: the informal training and self-commissioning of midwives in the rural Yucatan; the formal crafts-training of youthful tailors in Liberia; the training of quartermaster/navigator inductees in the US navy; the credentialing and on-the-job instruction of supermarket butchers in the US; and the struggle for a practice of sustained sobriety in Alcoholics Anonymous. They argue that exploitation is a possible, but not
valuable as aspects of legitimate peripheral participation. They allow students to exercise a variety of learning styles.\(^{52}\) They create a space where error costs are lower, and sustained reflection is easier, than in the world of professional practice. Valuing transparent tools and real production, however, means employing all these learning modalities critically, in light of the broader purposes that learners intend them to serve.

### III. Improvisation and Jazz as a Trope for Learning

Cultural workers need models for teaching and interpreting the Bible that situate learning critically and encourage critical “reflection upon experience.” They need models that embrace agency instead of getting in its way. I propose “improvisation” in general, and “jazz” in particular, as elegant and provocative tropes for creating a democratizing, “situated” Biblical pedagogy.\(^{53}\) For many today, “improvisation” may seem like an esoteric, almost arcane skill, the purview of bebop or experimental musicians and avant-garde theater buffs. But history, and a little reflection, suggest otherwise. There is a long and rich tradition of improvisational creativity in drama, arts and crafts – stretching from medieval jesting and clowning to the work of contemporary quilters. To limit our conversation to music, improvisation was integral to both “high” and popular culture around the North

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\(^{53}\) Schüssler Fiorenza’s trope of circle-“dance” is similarly improvisational: 16, 121, 124-5, 161. Like jazz, almost all dance must be formal-yet-creative; it must be profoundly interactive and attentive in order to come off well. “Jazz” emphasizes the solidarity, poly-centric aspects of emancipatory Bible work, and it highlights the ways in which creative interpretation generates new themes which the practicing community can take up and rework in the future.
Atlantic until the advent of the record industry.⁵⁴ Beethoven built his initial reputation on “improv,” da Vinci, Bach and Mozart were famous in their time for their improvisational skills.⁵⁵ “Even just a century ago … alteration to notes, elimination of movements, or significant changes in orchestration were comparatively common” in classical music performance.⁵⁶ And in popular American culture, fiddles and guitars, banjos and drums, harmonicas and gospel solos, were common – even when sheet music and formal training was not.

In fact, improvisation is not at all esoteric or unusual, because all authentic and creative human activities incorporate its movements. Musician and author Steven Nachmanovitch writes this about improvisation in art and life:

> The heart of improvisation is the free play of consciousness as it draws, writes, paints and plays the raw material emerging from the unconscious. … [In it, we find] a freedom that [is] both exhilarating and exacting. … [We produce] not that which is all new, but that which is fully and originally ourselves.⁵⁷

The free and agential improviser has mastered her discipline; she is fluent in its traditional forms. For example, the more she swims in the world of words and symbols, the better she can use them creatively to express what she means. The more he teaches his particular subject, the better he can “think on his feet” and make extemporaneous connections in front

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⁵⁴ In an insightful monograph, Augusto Boal, *Aesthetics of the Oppressed*, trans. Adrian Jackson (New York: Routledge, 2006) takes both mass media culture and the recording industry to task. He connects political passivity to a modern aesthetic shift: from self expression though improvisation, to self-expression through consumer choice.


⁵⁷ Nachmanovitch, *Free Play*, 9, 6, 13.
of a class. To speak in jazz metaphors, improvisers have mastered basic skills; they understand genres and aesthetic limits; they listen carefully and “jam” dialogically; they discern emergent patterns and play “through” blockages and mistakes. If improvisation is free and tutored self-expression, then humans are born to be improvisers, from cradle to grave.

Learning jazz demands a pedagogy that is psychologically astute. Practicing music as the wooden repetition of traditional forms only adds one more layer of teaching-oppression to unlearn, before interpreters can jam and create jazz with others. Teachers must structure the environment so that learners can identify and clear away the stumbling blocks – impediments that prevent learners from improvising as they were born to do. Jazz also implies an egalitarian creative ethos: knowing my own strengths and limits, studying my pluriform and flexible tradition, making space for the voices and views of others. Without such solidarity towards the dynamic, egalitarian community of practice (i.e. towards the jam session itself), jazz cannot come into existence. Attention to “marginalities” and “peripheral wisdom” may seem to be optional in other communities of practice; it is essential to the practice of jazz.

Like every human enterprise, Biblical interpretation is also an act of improvisation. At its best, it produces a raucous or elegantly moving piece of hermeneutical “jazz.”

58 Ibid., 6-7.
59 Benson notes, “Often the way in which composers and writers ‘improvise’ is much more subtle and noticeable only if one is familiar with the tradition in which the author is situated. And, of course, it may be that the more an author is ‘innovative,’ the less an author can be seen as ‘improvising’ (though the exact correlation of ‘innovation’ and ‘improvisation’ is, I think, open to question). “Improvisation of Hermeneutics,” 201, my italics.
Benson and Thomas Reynolds are both recent proponents of this thesis. As Benson puts it, “interpretation is inherently improvisatory in nature.” Biblical interpreters take up the materials of text, tradition and scholarship, the tools of method, the norms of some communities of practice, and shape a product situated toward a particular contextual goal.

Yet while a hermeneutic of “Biblical jazz” can imbue interpretation with an intrinsic democratizing ethos, Biblical Studies and Bible education cannot dispense with the critical feminist lens that emancipatory educators such as Schüssler Fiorenza propose. Without a preferential option for the poor, a hermeneutical privilege for the oppressed, or some other anti-kyriarchal articulation that the particular community of practice can develop, it becomes too easy to collude with the “normalized” dynamics of oppression. At the same time, a full-fledged pedagogy of improvisation can lead learners to develop their own anti-kyriarchal sensibilities. When group members attend to the disturbances and passionate involvements of their hearts – including the complaints of unfairness and the intimations of sympathy that can arise from encounters with kyriarchy – they begin to grind their own anti-kyriarchal lenses.

IV. A Sketch of the Grassroots Biblical Jazz Teacher at Work

A Biblical jazz curriculum helps educators to structure their classrooms as communities of legitimate peripheral participation. The kind of curriculum for situated, grassroots Bible education that I intimate below can develop capacities for critical self-consciousness and for competent improvisational creativity with Biblical materials. Such a curriculum encourages both students and teachers to reflect more deeply on their multiple

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identities and accountabilities. Further, it aligns well with the capacities that the fourth paradigm of Biblical Studies seeks to develop.

Imagine a lesson on Genesis 1-3 in which the teacher invites students to interpret the text for themselves. By structuring numerous contradictions into the learning environment, she entices them to break certain hegemonic molds – “The teacher is always right (or wrong).” “Will this be on the test?” “Because the Bible tells me so.” She engages them in a variety of reading strategies – e.g., theological, devotional, historical-critical, literary-hermeneutic, political. She underlines aporiai and opens up interpretations that move in different moral directions, toward different practical ends. The goal is not to stoke relativism (though a healthy dose of skepticism is always helpful among teens). The point is to model how adults (such as Bible educators, academics, or people of faith) can commit themselves to a responsible course of action in the face of conflicting readings. The corollary is a challenge: “You too can read and commit; which reading do you choose?” The final project is a student-led, adult-supported, parish Bible study for teens.

Imagine a month-long study unit that results in group-produced PowerPoint presentations. Students use Bible texts to explore a set of existential questions about teenage life: racism, sexism, relationships, and so on. The complex process of identifying themes, selecting passages and refining exegeses is guided both by a set of worksheet organizers, and by examples of completed projects from the previous year. Students work to discover and employ their own voices in the interpretive process, and their own creativity and innovation as they “play” (with) the text. While the passages are classic, the answers

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63 Supporting the needs of parents, faculty, and staff is a related and critical, but different question.
are improvised or “jammed” within the group. Selected finished slides are posted on a school-wide website, or used for reflection at the monthly prayer service.

Imagine a year-long curriculum that situates Bible education in a framework of praxis and discernment: (1) “listening” to the passions and disturbances of the heart; (2) “understanding” the history and implications of emergent themes; (3) critically “remembering” Biblical/historical data and creatively “imagining” a non-kyriarchal response; (4) “acting” to generate products that can make a tangible difference in the world. Learning becomes more transparent as students study the process of discernment itself. They locate their assignments, lessons and units within this framework throughout the year. Students situate Bible education in their own lives. This could mean using religion class as a planning space for school-wide liturgy; it could mean project-based learning that results in strategic anti-sexist interventions in the cafeteria or around the family TV; or it could mean full-scale participatory action research projects in which adults and youth partner to explore a concrete problem in the neighborhood, then implement and evaluate a solution, using Biblical discourse as a key tool.65

64 The framework derives from David White, Practicing Discernment with Youth: A Transformative Youth Ministry Approach (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 2005). It parallels the “meaning making” hermeneutics/pedagogy described in Schüssler Fiorenza.

65 I developed this type of “discernment” based curriculum for inner city high school freshmen. The most thorough-going secular model of such rigorous “discernment” work with youth is “youth participatory action research.” See Julio Cammarota and Michelle Fine, ed., Revolutionizing Education: Youth Participatory Action Research in Motion (New York: Routledge, 2008). Participatory action research exemplifies how emancipatory education can only occur when teachers and students each lead the learning process. “What matters is the interaction of the planned and the emergent – that is, the ability of teaching and learning [or teachers and students] to interact so as to become structuring resources for each other.” Wenger, Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity, 267. For an example of participatory action research on the graduate level, see the description of a sustained local-seminary partnership for research, training and community transformation in
All of these examples involve aligning the implicit and explicit curricula of Bible education with a consistent goal: ever more free and learned cultural production. Learning may include quizzes, projects and assignments, but it is framed by students’ participation in communities outside the classroom. This is a graduated pedagogy for unlearning hegemony and developing real-life creative capacities. It belies the false dichotomy between passive “socialization” and advanced “critical thinking.” Instead, education becomes the continual praxis of reflection and action in an anti-kyriarchal key; the place to produce Biblical jazz by performing critical improvisations upon a rich and pluriform tradition. In this setting, students learn to negotiate overlapping accountabilities to family, street, school, church and work. Their reflection generates new insights, and sends them back to the classroom and the library, the internet and even the Bible in search of deeper knowledge.

V. Implications for the Graduate Classroom in Biblical Studies

Is Biblical Studies structured to graduate professionals with the capacity for this kind of work? Are its curricula – explicit, implicit, and null – aligned to foster the making of Biblical jazz? As Schüssler Fiorenza has argued, democratizing Biblical Studies means re-envisioning what it means to teach the Bible, and restructuring what transpires in the university classroom. Adopting the situated learning perspective that I advocate shifts the focus from teaching to learning. It shifts attention from course content and teaching style to learner practices, learning tasks and learner needs. In a Biblical Studies classroom with emancipatory commitments, this shift brings many important tasks to light. I sketch three of a rural Canadian setting in Cameron R. Harder, “Using Participatory Action Research in Seminary Internships,” *Theological Education* 42(2), 2007: 127-39.
them here. The first two advance professional competence, while the last is a critically important matter of curricular structure.

First, engaging an emancipatory form of Biblical Studies requires learners to articulate their professional identity, mission and vision, in terms of overlapping communities of practice. Second, it requires them to sort out their relationships to the different paradigms within Biblical Studies, and the different interpretative techniques and strategies that those paradigms represent. Finally, emancipatory Biblical Studies requires a pedagogy of real production, if its explicit and implicit curricula are to be aligned.

First, then, situating Biblical Studies in the lives and commitments of learners means addressing learners’ identities. As Lave insists, learning itself can be characterized as “the identity-making life project of participants in communities of practice.”66 Because of the intersectional nature of identity, Biblical Studies academics and graduate students must articulate their professional work in light of overlapping accountabilities. Some of the practices and norms within their multiple communities are identical, some are compatible, and some are diametrically opposed. Professional competence in Bible requires that learners name and claim their norms. This means articulating the readings strategies that they have chosen, and the agendas that give their intellectual products meaning. Such a practice of articulating one’s commitments about the Bible humanely, within a pluralistic setting, is a valuable skill; it is the praxis of a civil rhetoric within a republic of many Biblical voices.

66 Lave, Teaching, as Learning, 157. Cf. Wenger, Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity, 268: “Consequently, deep transformative experiences that involve new dimensions of identification and negotiability, new forms of membership, multimembership, and ownership of meaning – even in one specific or narrowly defined domain – are likely to be more widely significant in terms of long-term ramifications of learning than extensive coverage of a broad, but abstractly general, curriculum.”
Sorting out and analyzing one’s specific practices of Biblical interpretation is the next task in an emancipatory Biblical Studies classroom. Some committed religionists may align their work with the first paradigm of Biblical interpretation, but ground their readings on the historical-critical positivism of the second; some liberationists wish to claim the methods of the fourth paradigm, but appeal to the norms of Biblical theology that animate the first. This is not so much a problem of intellectual purity, as one of situated dilemmas and pitfalls: ignoring unresolved conflicts and knotty theoretical impasses produces tangled skeins, from which kyriarchy, collusion and cultural assimilation can strike out to affect our teaching while avoiding easy detection. For example, there is a genuine tension within inner city Catholic schooling between “resisting culturally” and “deconstructing hegemony:” while tradition and cultural cohesion can be powerful bulwarks against assimilation, unmasking and dismantling oppression requires critical consciousness and a hermeneutics of suspicion toward the past. And again, embracing the improvisational nature of interpretation in the classroom or pulpit cuts against the grain of theological and historical-critical strategies that seek to convey the positive(istical)ly “true meaning” of the text. If interpretation is improvisational, are all cultural products, including Scripture? This is a serious error for some religionists; how can it be reconciled with a pedagogy of Biblical jazz?

Sorting out these issues entails distinguishing the paradigms of Biblical interpretation (which are academic communities of practice) from the interpretive strategies and practices they espouse (which both non-academics and seasoned academics often employ in tangled

67 “An emancipatory pedagogical process of Biblical interpretation … applies itself both to the level of text and of interpretation.” Ibid., 164. For a detailed account of how “Matthew” may have improvised his dominical sayings from the text of Q, see David E. Orton, The Understanding Scribe: Matthew and the Apocalyptic Ideal (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 165-176.
and eclectic ways). It means untangling strategies and identifying dilemmas. And it entails saying “yes” to some values, “no” to others. Thus, for example, as a Catholic Bible educator, I tried to reconcile suspicion with cultural resistance by articulating a vision in which liberationist values and analysis fix and focus theological norms. For some of my coreligionists, this lies beyond the pale of Catholic practice.

Finally, training Bible educators as facilitators for Biblical jazz requires alignment between explicit and implicit curricula. That is, it requires a Biblical Studies setting of real intellectual production. Imagine a graduate school of religion where classroom instruction and programs of study included publishing, conference preparation, public presentations, and participatory action research – jointly prepared by faculty and students – all as a matter of course. Imagine a divinity school where every Bible class included a worship, a service, or a web-based publishing component. This is perhaps the most challenging aspect of emancipatory, situated learning in Biblical Studies, because it requires professors and students to break professionally risky ground. Will such courses be approved, respected, or enrolled in? Will peer reviewers and search committees recognize the (truly sweat-inducing) rigor of these scholarly activities? Yet it is counterproductive to “teach” a hermeneutic for real-life transformation purely through classroom discussion. It is self-defeating for emancipatory educators to structure learning environments that have minimal tangible impact upon learners’ professional and vocational worlds. From a situated learning

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68 I heartily thank Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza for pointing out this distinction between paradigms and strategies in our Democratizing Biblical Studies seminar at Harvard Divinity School, Spring 2009.
69 Cf. Harder, Using Participatory Action Research.
70 Thanks to my colleague Arminta Fox for pointing out the multiple significances of the term “self-defeating” here. To educate for emancipation by using sequestered academic work
perspective, all learning involves both concrete experience and abstract reflection. Frustrated learning (i.e., learning about frustration) involves forceful sequestration from the processes of actual production, interaction, and social impact.  

**Conclusion**

In this paper, I have extended Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s pedagogical and didactic proposals by arguing that an emancipatory form of Biblical Studies requires us to re-imagine teaching Bible in terms of “situated learning” – both at the graduate and grassroots levels. Situated learning theory draws attention to the communities of practice that teachers and students construct inside the classroom. It also acknowledges the communities of practice to which teachers and students are responsible outside the classroom doors. It challenges academics who hope to democratize Biblical Studies: it calls upon them to explore their own sitze im leben, and those of their students, with the same acumen and professional scruples by which they investigate the life-settings of the text. This means adjusting the form and content of academic practice in ways that can be both unnerving and professionally perilous: addressing group dynamics and learning-process structures, privileging transparent learning activities and processes of real production. This academic work is exciting, but counter-cultural. Because it can generate resistance and attract negative professional attention, it is best done in solidarity with colleagues (including students) who can energize and support it. But because of the liberating Biblical jazz that it promises to produce, I would argue, such work is well worth the toil, and the risk.

defeats the emancipatory project; it also defeats the sense of an agential “self” at that project’s heart.